



Who's minding the shore?

Preservation conference takes stock of efforts to tame waterfront clutter

01:00 AM EST on Sunday, April 2, 2006

Whither the waterfront?

That, more or less, is the timely question behind this year's 21st Annual Historic Preservation Conference, which takes place Saturday at sites in and around Pawtuxet Village.

Subtitled "Outlooks and Opportunities on the Waterfront," the one-day conference includes panel discussions on the history, development and preservation of Rhode Island's coastal areas, as well as bus and trolley tours of the Pawtuxet and Edgewood waterfronts.

Last week, I had a chance to talk to three of the conference panelists: Providence architects Charlie Cannon and Paul R.V. Pawlowski and Richard C. Youngken, executive director of the Dunn Foundation, a Newport-based nonprofit that deals with waterfront issues.

On Saturday, the three will join WaterFire creator Barnaby Evans in a discussion of "The Visual Language of the Waterfront," a topic the conference's brochure defines as anything relating to the "waterfront's visual character," including its "aesthetics, social dimensions and sense of place."

-- BILL VAN SICLEN

Q: Most people, I think, would agree that Narragansett Bay and the Rhode Island coast are the state's biggest economic and environmental assets. Are we doing enough to protect them from overdevelopment?

Youngken: I'd say we're doing a halfway decent job. Environmentally, I think the Bay is in better shape than it has been in years, although the latest environmental report from Save the Bay wasn't very encouraging about things like sewage discharge in the Upper Bay.

Visually and aesthetically, however, I don't think we're doing very well at all. Most of our historic districts, for example, don't include waterfront areas. That makes absolutely no sense to me, since the waterfront has always been an integral part of Rhode Island's history. We are, after all, the Ocean State.

Pawlowski: I also don't think people realize how quickly these areas are changing. . . . People are tearing down smaller buildings and replacing them with much bigger and generally less attractive structures. I'm sure they all have a great view from their front porches, but what about everyone else's view? Who goes to the beach to look at sprawl?

Q: So what needs to be done? If it's true that waterfront areas are important for historic, economic and even aesthetic reasons, how do we protect them?

Youngken: First, we need to remind people that they have a stake in how waterfront areas are developed. Traditionally, I think, Americans see the waterfront -- and particularly the residential waterfront -- as somebody else's backyard. That needs to change. The public needs to recognize that it has a huge stake in how waterfront areas look and how they're developed.

Rather than somebody else's backyard, we need to think of the waterfront as the Ocean State's front yard. And that's true whether we're talking about the ocean, the Bay or our inland rivers and lakes.

Q: Can you cite some examples of successful waterfront development, either in Rhode Island or elsewhere?

Youngken: If you're looking for something that really stands out, at least in my mind, it's the Inn at Castle Hill in Newport. I think it's a great example of historic reuse -- in this case, a grand old Victorian "cottage" that has been converted into an upscale hotel and restaurant. Obviously, you can't turn every older building into a luxury hotel, but I think it's a great example of how aesthetic, historic and development-related interests can dovetail.

I also think it illustrates the importance of open space. Just think how much less impact that view would have if the main inn building was surrounded by dozens of other large buildings. In fact, you can get a sense of what it would look like as you leave the grounds. The entrance looks across to the inland side of Brenton Point, where development is completely out of control.

Cannon: One city that everyone seems to cite as a model of waterfront planning is Baltimore. When the city started redeveloping its Inner Harbor area 25 years ago, it made a conscious effort to give both public and private interests a stake in the planning process. [Now] it's probably the most successful example of waterfront development in the country.

Q: So far, we've been talking about "the waterfront" as though it were a relatively homogeneous place. But part of what makes Rhode Island's waterfront unique is its variety. Watch Hill, Warren and Woonsocket are all in Rhode Island, yet their "waterfronts" are amazingly different.

Youngken: Absolutely. And preserving that diversity is one of the biggest challenges we face. The kind of waterfront development that may be appropriate for places like Watch Hill or Newport or Little Compton isn't going to be appropriate for the working waterfronts of Galilee or Warren, or the industrial waterfronts of Providence and East Providence.

Cannon: At the same time, I think there is some good news in terms of preserving waterfront diversity. In East Providence, for example, there's been a lot of discussion about preserving some of the industrial character on the east side of the Seekonk River. The bad news is that many people still think of the Rhode Island waterfront solely in terms of a nostalgic, lighthouse-and-sunset sense. That's great for some parts of the state, but completely wrong for others.

Q: A rising tide of McMansions isn't the only problem facing Rhode Island's coastal areas. How do you think predictions of stronger and more frequent hurricanes will affect waterfront planning and development?

Pawlowski: Well, for one thing, a lot of people are going to start wishing they lived on higher ground. I mean, there's been this incredible push in recent years to build as close to the water as physically and legally possible. I don't know if a single event like Hurricane Katrina can change that dynamic. But I am sure that what happened in New Orleans probably caused a lot of homeowners in other parts of the country to reread their insurance policies.

Youngken: Frankly, I think we're already seeing the effects of a busier and more intense Atlantic storm season here in New England. I'm thinking particularly of a number of places along the South County coast, where buildings are threatened by rising levels of beach erosion. The historic Willow Dell beach pavilion in Matunuck, for example, may have to be moved well back from its current location to protect it from weather-related damage.

The point is that you don't have to have a major storm like Hurricane Katrina to cause damage to waterfront areas. Even a relatively small increase in the intensity of storms can have a long-term impact.

The 21st Annual Historic Preservation Conference takes place Saturday from 8:30 to 6 p.m. Registration and the conference's keynote address will be held at Rhodes-on-the-Pawtuxet, 60 Rhodes Place (off Broad Street) in Cranston. The \$35 registration fee includes morning coffee and a snack, lunch and admission to the conference's closing reception. For more information, call (401) 732-6335 or visit www.preservation.ri.gov/conference.

bvansicl@projo.com / (401) 277-7421

Online at: http://www.projo.com/art/content/projo_20060402_preserv02.2efb4d3.html